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## **Editorial: Mental-health court needed**

Last week we published reporter Carson Gerber's story about a new program that is both revolutionary and badly needed.

"Howard County is set to launch a mental-health court that will allow offenders suffering from a mental illness to get treatment rather than go to jail," Gerber reported in Thursday's Tribune. "Superior Court II Judge Brant Parry, who will oversee the program, said the new court will allow qualifying offenders with a mental illness to enter a pretrial diversion program. If offenders complete the program, their criminal charges will be dismissed."

Alcohol and drug treatment, therapy and education in applying for benefits and housing will all play roles in what will be known as a "problem-solving court."

"[It] will focus on offenders whose criminal activity stems primarily from a mental illness, Parry said, but it might also be open to people with substance abuse issues or intellectual disabilities," Gerber

reported. “Officials said the goal of the court is to get treatment and services to mentally ill offenders who break the law, but don’t have any criminal intent, rather than send them to jail, which often only aggravates their condition.”

This is a phenomenal step forward in an effort to find a common sense approach to dealing with mentally ill inmates who have not committed sex crimes or faced charges involving children. Sheriff Steve Rogers estimates more than 20 percent of all inmates in the county jail are taking some sort of psychotropic medication for a mental illness, and more than 20 inmates have applied for the program.

This relatively new approach has only been around since the 1990s, and Howard County will be only the seventh in the state to start one.

Gerber has been writing about this issue for some time and has explored in depth just how much of a factor mental illness plays in the local jail population. Rogers even traveled to Indianapolis last year to inform lawmakers of the persistent problem.

“Steve Rogers told a state legislative committee ... the jail has become the largest provider of mental-health services in the area,” Gerber reported on Sept. 17, 2014. “County jails across the state are being used to manage the mentally ill, but that doesn’t mean they should be.

Rogers said the jail is often the worst place for someone with a mental illness and usually aggravates their issues. Rogers met with 12 state senators and representatives ... who are part of a legislative study committee focusing on community corrections and criminal code to ask for help solving one of the biggest problems facing county jails.”

We applaud the county, and especially Judge Parry, for spearheading this program. It does our county no favors when we criminalize mental illness out-of-hand. These offenders need our help, not more punishment for being sick.